

# Isuzu hires old friend to pitch new SUV

By Bruce Horowitz  
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Joe Isuzu is about to ooze his way back into car ads.

No lie.

With sales lagging and its image sagging, American Isuzu Motors next week will return to one of the most memorable of all ad icons.

But this time Joe Isuzu, played by actor David Leisure, won't tell baldfaced lies about Isuzus. He reappears jobless, potbellied and aching to get back into Isuzu ads.

"Maybe for one moment I asked myself: Should I do this again?" says Leisure by phone from the Los Angeles set where the ads were being filmed this week. "But how could I not? It's so much fun."

Isuzu's goal: sell its new Axiom



**Looking scruffy:** Joe Isuzu appears in new ads after 10 years.

SUV, in showrooms in April.

In the spots that Leisure starred in more than 10 years ago, he bragged about such things as Isuzu's top speed of 300 mph. The bottom of the screen featured print disclaimers to each fib.

This time around: no disclaimers

but plenty of smarmy Joe. The first ad shows a couch potato Joe, muttering as he watches an Isuzu spot. "They haven't done a decent commercial since they cut me loose."

In the next ad, Joe gets a surprise call from Isuzu to return.

For Leisure, the extra pounds come care of makeup artists. His paycheck? Industry executives estimate \$500,000 to \$1 million.

Can Joe sell? Maybe. Just as many Americans were able to like President Clinton and ignore what got him impeached, it could work, says consultant Barbara Brooks. "But Joe (also) may seem symptomatic of things wrong with society today."

Jerry Della Femina, the New York adman whose agency created Joe, isn't surprised by the comeback.

"It's about time," he says.

Indeed, trade magazine *Advertising Age* ranked Joe Isuzu as one of the 100 best ad campaigns of the century. In the 1988 presidential debates, Democrat Michael Dukakis called George Bush the "Joe Isuzu of American politics."

Leisure, 50, says he's still recognized everywhere as Joe Isuzu. Nevermind that he starred in the NBC sitcom *Empty Nest* from 1988 to 1995.

Joe Isuzu's 1980s job was to familiarize folks with a new brand. His role this time is to move Axioms, backed by a 50% ad budget increase to \$125 million this year, says Duke Hale, COO of American Isuzu. "This time around, Joe isn't the story. The product is the story."

Don't tell Joe that. He'll walk.